how memory is akin to remorse

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how memory is akin to remorse

by kitnkabootle

Summary

Several years following Olivia's time at Les Avons, the young woman has never managed to extract Mademoiselle Julie from her heart.

Notes

I have much to say about Olivia, written by Dorothy Bussy. This is the most honest, deep and heartfelt coming of age story I have ever read / watched. Hopefully others wanted the sequel as I did. Please write and tell me your thoughts, if not about my writing, about "Olivia" itself.

Chapter 1

The letter came on a Friday which made it all the crueler.

The envelope post-marked from Canada and worn from travel, was left on the stoop in a bundle of other post that was eventually collected without fanfare by the house servant, Maude. There it sat on the library desk for hours before I'd noticed it. I was cross that Maude had not come to fetch me. Infuriated that she hadn't run through the crisp frost bitten grass surrounding Beauclaire House where I took my morning walk, the envelope held aloft, flapping in the wind.

For it had been two years of silence from Signorina. Years since she'd told me that Mlle Julie had asked me not to write again. Years since I'd felt my stomach braid into knots so tight I had been ill from it. I obeyed her request and had not pressed ink to paper, telling her how I had missed her though it was still the wretched truth. I yearned for time to slow, so slow that it would switch backward and I would find myself once more in the great foyer of Les Avons, stopping before the library door and resting my hand upon it, knowing Mlle Julie was there on the other side.

How I thought often of that library, of closing my book and rushing to sit at her feet, gathering her hands into mine and confessing the secrets of my heart. I still could not recall what she had done or said, or if she'd reacted at all, but my imagination filled in the details where memory could not. When I was at my most shattered, the Mlle Julie of my mind would recoil and extract her hands from mine, her skirts catching beneath my knees as she tried to leave. When I felt the warmth of those early days, I could imagine her turning my hands over within hers and bringing my fingertips to her soft lips. Other days I couldn't imagine her reaction at all.

Still a day did not pass where I did not think of her. When I would write to the other girls, I would shamefully inquire if they'd heard anything of her. No one ever had, and some stopped answering my questions entirely. For Mlle Julie was merely a figure of their past. They'd learned from her, perhaps recalled how well she read and how intelligent and charismatic she was. But she existed only in their memory, something they would visit infrequently; a passing fancy. She did not haunt their hearts in every waking moment as she did mine.

Try as I did, I could not extract her, could not leave her behind. She

existed in my every quiet moment, intrinsically woven into the tapestry of my days and more often in my nights when I could hear her footsteps outside my door despite her being an entire ocean away.

I locked the door to my chamber and took Signorina's letter to my bed. I sat with it until I could calm the frantic beating of my heart. Oh how I wish I had not been overcome by the brokenness of it and had not thrown Mlle Julie's gift to me out of my window at Les Avons. If I had the ivory paper-cutter now I would use it to slice through the envelope ceremoniously, for after years of nothing it felt too important to tear. Still, unable to wait any longer, I did rip at its edge until I could free the paper from inside, and read it with my heart caught high in my throat.

There were no flowery words, no sweet stories on the page. It was short, and dated more than a month gone, its message so devastating that I was sick from it.

Olivia,

I write with grave news. Mademoiselle Julie has the winter fever and she is not expected to survive. I am sorry. — S.

I could not recall much from the hours that followed but somehow in my dreamlike state, I had made arrangements for the lengthy journey. I had purchased passage on a steamship bound for Canada, managing by mere luck (and a heavy purse) at such a short notice, to find myself on the next sailing. Two days after I learned of Mlle Julie's condition, I found myself traversing the planks of the pier, surrounded by families and strangers, with not a friend in sight.

It was two and half weeks before I would set foot on the shores of Halifax.

Even now as I sit in a carriage, rolling through the city, the envelope and address clutched between my gloved fingertips, I feel like none of this is real. She has not left my mind for even a second since I read the letter. I have read it now countless times, trying to glean new meaning from it, trying to find specs of hope threaded in the cursive words.

As my hired carriage moves through the streets of the new home she has made for herself, I feel closer to her. For she has no doubt walked these streets, or driven through them, in a glass-paned carriage, dripping with jewels and fur as she had done in Paris. What did these townspeople think of the beautiful foreign woman that had deigned to claim their home for herself? Did they stare as she went by? Had she

caught the eye of any wealthy or otherwise highborn gentlemen? That last thought turns my stomach so I don't dare dwell on it.

Halifax seems a strange choice, especially for a Frenchwoman, when Canada itself had a French speaking territory and Mlle Julie preferred her natural language. I find it even more curious that she had not chosen to start another school, as Signorina's letters had seemed to divulge.

I had no time to write that I was coming. Any word I would have sent would have arrived after my own person, so the effort was futile at best. I'm not expected, and as much as I regret the social impropriety, it remains the least of my concerns.

I'm jolted as the hackney-carriage wheels grind to a stop beside a large beautiful home nestled between others in the lane. I descend carefully from the carriage and the driver unloads my travel trunk. I've brought only the necessities for I do not yet know how long I will stay.

A dusting of snow softly crunches beneath my feet as I make my way up the front path and ascend the stairs. I see a vase of wilted flowers near the door and my stomach clenches with sudden worry. What if I am too late? What if she has left this world, and me behind and ascended to the great divine? I may have spent weeks at sea traveling to a country I've never even wished to visit, to find it wanting the one person that would make it worthwhile.

I lift the metal door knocker and hammer it twice. Behind me the carriage driver lugs my trunk and drops it against the floorboards of the covered front porch. I drop farthings in his outstretched hand. He turns them over, dismayed to find it isn't in the local currency and grumbles before returning to the carriage.

The door opens abruptly and it startles my attention.

"Olivia?"

It is Signorina looking barely a year older than when I last saw her. She smiles broadly and throws her arms around me so quickly that I stumble, the back of my heeled boot hitting the edge of my trunk.

"Signorina, oh how I have missed you!"

She ushers me inside ahead of her before she drags my trunk through the archway of the door.

I wave my hands to stop her, “Oh no, you mustn’t. I don’t want to impose, but I have come directly from port to spare no time.”

“You will stay here with us Olivia, and I won’t hear a word against it.”

Us. Dare I hope?

“Oh you must tell me,” I take up her hand in mine, “is she well?”

Signorina’s smile fades and she holds my hand within both of hers. I try to search out the answer before she speaks, try to find it written in the depths of her irises, in the darkness beneath her eyes.

“She lives.”

It’s simply said, there will be more to come of it of course, but this is enough to soothe the gripping pain in my chest, if only for a moment.

“She is gravely ill,” Signorina continues, “and she does not leave her bed. Each day I read to her from her books, and I brush her hair and help her with bathing. But she says very little.”

“What does the doctor say?”

“That she will either live or she will succumb but that he does not know which outcome is most possible. Still he visits twice a week and there are draughts he leaves for her but she doesn’t take them. I believe she still thinks of Mlle Cara.”

A breath shutters in my throat and I realize I’ve been holding it for too long. Mlle Cara is not someone I’ve thought of since — well it’s been much too long now. Still upon hearing her name I shiver from the cold of that night I had stood near the end of her bed, Mlle Julie’s fingertips caressing the skin beneath my chin as she rose my eyes to Mlle Cara’s lifeless body. I think of waking that next morning when Mlle Julie confessed that my presence at her door had stopped her from taking her own life. I still felt the gravity of the loss that might have been — even now.

“Oh Olivia, come in out of the cold. Let’s get you some tea and sit near the fire until you are warm. Then perhaps after dinner I can bring you to Mlle Julie’s room.”

Just knowing I am in the same house as her makes my fingers tremble as if I were a schoolgirl again. I wonder if she too will be exempt from the ravages of time or if she will look much different then when I last

saw her. It takes everything within me not to run through the house until I find her room, to throw myself at the foot of her bed and tell her how she has cursed me. How I want her to know what she has done to me and how I want to know that she too has been haunted by these shared memories.

We take tea near the fire as promised and I spend the time Signorina's preparing it, looking around the parlor. The style is not dissimilar to Les Avons, though it's clear there's more British influence here. Still there are some bits here and there that are classic touches of the Frenchwoman; a lacy shawl draped across the high back chair, a gathering of dried french lavender on the mantle.

"Does she ever ask after me?"

Signorina sets her tea cup against the saucer, a tiny sound that rings fortissimo in the otherwise silent house.

"We don't speak of you." Signorina admits almost sheepishly. "She asked me not to."

My throat is tight as I swallow my tea. "Was it wrong of me to come?"

Signorina moves to sit at my side on the chaise. "Sometimes Mlle Julie does not know what is in her own best interest. I am certain she needs to see you, Olivia. It cannot be left as it was."

I feel now, despite Signorina's encouragement, an unwelcome guest. What if she is wrong and Mlle Julie is dismayed I have come? What if she had tried to be rid of me, and I have now invaded her last sanctuary?

I consider my options and part of me wishes to make my excuses and depart. But the other part of me, the much louder side, demands that I see her again. Even if she is to turn me out with the coldness she displayed on our last meeting, when she barricaded herself behind her desk and held up her hand to stop me from drawing too near to her. Still I never dreamed that would be the last time I would look upon her face. And knowing it shall not be, I am relieved.

Signorina prepares dinner for us and a third plate which she takes up to Mlle Julie. When she returns to the table, I ask her if she has announced that I am here.

"Yes I told her," she says quietly, her expression unreadable. It makes me feel uneasy and spoils my appetite. Still I make a show of enjoying

my meal so as not to offend Signorina. I can only imagine the stress my being here has produced.

After dinner, she clears her throat and gestures to the staircase. ”Her room is at the end of the hall. Knock before you enter. I will attend to the washing up.”

My palms are clammy on the polished bannister as I make my way up the stairs. My heels strike prominent foot falls at the top of the landing. How curious that she no doubt can hear me drawing near to her bed chamber as I once listened for her, hoping that I would see the handle turn and catch the silhouette of her in the sliver of light at my door. Would she feel that way now? Or am I the executioner ascending the steps of the gallows?

I stop before her door and allow my shaking hand to caress the wood of it. Then gently, my breath held tight, I rap my knuckles upon it.

There is no answer. I listen intently for any sound on the other side. When only silence follows, I turn to leave, unwilling to disturb her, despite the swell of disappointment I feel.

Then ever so softly I hear the familiar deep tones of her voice, silken and caressing even still after all these years, eliciting a secret ache within me.

“Entrée.”

Chapter 2

A shuddering breath. A pause.

I turn the door handle and step into the darkened room. It's lit only by candle and firelight that cast theatrical shadows on the wall. Her bed is empty, the bed linens disturbed.

I walk a few steps in trepidation before there is movement from the corner of my eye and I see her. I cannot make out her features, as she stands beside the crackling fireplace, another figure in silhouette. She seems shorter than I remember her being, or perhaps it's just that I am taller. I wonder perhaps a little shamefully, if I look more mature to her now.

"Mlle Julie," I say when I find my voice. I dare not step too close as it all seems so terrifyingly precarious, "it is Olivia."

"My eyesight does not fail me yet," she answers wryly, stepping toward me several paces and finally coming into the light that's cast from the candle on her bedside table. How I have missed her voice.

Her features are revealed to me and my chest constricts almost painfully at the sight. It is as if I have been tumbling down a hill, my body unresisting and free until it collides with force against a tree.

She looks much the same now as she had then, though she is thinner and the pallor of her face is shockingly fair despite her skin having the natural color of fired porcelain. Her hair is lighter too, with strands of white woven through the dark. I wish the years had made her grotesque. Perhaps then I would be vain enough to be broken from her spell. Instead my skin prickles with desire, as strong and immediate as it had the night I buried my nose against her neck when she spoke of weakness, of weariness, of wishing to give in. Much to my chagrin, she is still astoundingly beautiful.

She wears a pale dressing gown over her bed clothes and it flows around her, frothily trimmed with Chantilly lace, the hems fanned out against the floor.

There is so much to say but I don't know where to begin so I fiddle with the sleeve of my dress.

"You look well," I decide that some formality is best, "Signorina wrote

me of your illness. I hope you are not upset that I have come."

Mlle Julie watches me, her eyes are dark in the dim lighting but as expressive as they've always been. She doesn't answer, and I feel my cheeks burn with embarrassment. How have I misjudged?

"Well," I take small steps backwards towards the door until the handle nudges my back through my corset, "I will not darken your door for long. It pleases me that you are well—"

But just as I say it, I can see her sway, her fingertips clutching the wooden post at the foot of her bed. It happens so quickly and unexpectedly that my instinct takes over and I rush forward to catch her within my arms before she can fall. She sags against me and I can feel the slightness of her for the first time.

How strange it is, to be the closest to her that I have been since my youth. How startling and yet familiar it is to smell the fragrance of her hair, to see the dark spread of lashes across her cheek.

I pull the bed linens back and ease her into them, drawing the pillow beneath my hand that cradles the back of her head. My fingers are buried in the auburn curls at her crown and I look upon her beautiful features with the same awe I have always held for her. The only indication that any years have passed is in the faint lines at the corners of her eyes and fainter still between her brows. I feel her chest rising and falling quickly against mine and I look down the length of her figure, allowing my hand to smooth down the front of her. My thoughts in such a situation might otherwise be impure, but I am far too concerned with searching for the laces of her corset so that I may loosen it and provide her some relief. As my fingertips ripple over her ribcage beneath the thin muslin, I can tell she isn't wearing one.

Still the intimacy of it all colors my cheek. I retract my hand and my fingertips tremble as I move them to her neck to slip the top pearl buttons free from each eyelet. The skin of her throat is hot beneath my touch as I part the lacy fabric to give her air. The press of my hand to her brow diagnoses the fever raging within her and I extract myself from her side and step out in the hall calling for help.

Signorina comes quickly up the stairs and passes me by to Mlle Julie's side. She pours water from the beside table into a porcelain bowl and dips a square of flannel into it. After ringing out the excess water, she presses it to Mlle Julie's neck and forehead.

"I think I will have to call for the doctor."

“Can I help?” I feel useless to Signorina, and worse to Mlle Julie, my heart rapidly thundering away inside of me and I feel I too could faint.

“I will go fetch the doctor if you can sit with her and freshen the cloth when it becomes too warm.”

“Of course.” I step forward as Signorina leaves the room and perch on the edge of Mlle Julie’s bed. She looks frightfully fragile, her skin flushed and her lips a pale shade of pink. I lift the flannel and follow instructions, cooling it in the water before pressing it against her skin.

She stirs beneath me and it’s with a sudden movement that she catches my wrist within her soft hands.

Her eyelashes part and she looks up at me, breathless.

“Shh,” I try to calm her, but still she grips my wrist and looks up at me as if through a veil obscuring my features.

“Olivia,” she whispers, her fingers tightening.

I watch as her eyelashes fall across her glassy irises and she releases me, her body limp, her breath uneven.

I freshen the flannel and slip three more buttons free along the front of her dressing gown, apologizing to the air before exposing the skin of her décolleté and laying the cool cloth against her flushed skin. She moans, her brow catching in pain.

It feels hours before Signorina returns with the doctor, and I rise as if in a dream and step out into the hall. I feel ill from it. There is nothing I can do to help her, but oh how I wish I could take the burden of it onto myself.

Afterwards, Signorina joins me in the hallway and we stand in silence until the doctor steps out, closing the door to her room behind him.

“Will she recover?” I ask, unbidden. It isn’t even my place to pose such a question, but I cannot hold back.

He scratches his hand across his beard and uses the tip of his finger to straighten his eyeglasses.

“It is uncertain. If the fever breaks, she has a chance of recovery. The coming hours will paint a clearer picture.” He offers no solace.

Signorina sees the doctor to the door while I stand paralyzed in the

hall. Somewhere I can hear a clock ticking in the otherwise quiet hall and it sets my teeth on edge. For how much longer would I share a world with her? Were our hours together few? Would I hear again the smooth flow of her voice as each syllable of Racine formed upon her lips?

When Signorina rejoins me upstairs, I can tell the past months have ravaged her. She looks exhausted, worn and ever on the verge of tears. I reach for her hand but find it not enough and instead embrace her tightly.

“I will care for her this evening. You must sleep.”

“I can’t ask that of—,” she says but I interrupt without hesitation.

“You have cared for her well Signorina. Please allow me the chance to do the same.”

She bows her head and offers me a tender smile, relenting. As she wordlessly moves towards what appears to be the door to her own chambers, she stops to look back at me.

“She has been heartbroken without you,” she says with kindness, “I feel it important for you to know, especially now.”

Then Signorina is gone and I am alone in the hall with revelations I have been unprepared for. Was that even the truth of it? But there isn’t time to dwell on that. The past may be all that Mlle Julie and I will ever share and yet it all feels irrelevant with the weight of the present.

I let myself back into her chamber and find her asleep in her bed. She looks more peaceful than before. Her breath comes easier and her limp hand rests upon the pillow near her head, delicate and small. Absent are the rings she once wore, the rings I can still feel against my lips as I kissed her ever-withdrawing hands.

I lift the glass bottle near her bedside to the light and read ‘Laudanum’ written upon it. I can’t imagine she’s taken it willingly but it’s clearly had the desired effect regardless.

Sitting next to her I refresh the cool flannel, allowing my fingertips to trace her brow. How our positions have reversed! For once she had sat upon my bed, as I do hers now, and placed a kiss to my cheek beneath my eyes. The curious sensation that had coursed through my body in response was new to me then, like a saccharine tremor.

When she'd left my bedchamber, I had clenched my thighs tight together though it had done little to quell the ache between them. Ashamed as I am to let myself dwell, I do wonder if there was a time she felt that rush of desire while thinking of me.

Now I look again upon her, as I had done years ago while her eyes traced words on a page, or she dozed softly on the train from Paris. I study her as she hoped I would study the artwork she shared with me, but for which I had no interest.

"Look, look Olivia!" She would place her jeweled fingers on my arms and turn me towards a painting in a Parisian gallery. I would stand facing it, though I could not tell what it was that I was regarding for all I could focus on was the feeling of her arm about me.

The night creeps slowly towards day but I do not leave her side. For hours I exchange the water to cool her skin, and fan her gently. Some time in the early hours of morning, after the sun has risen and illuminated the room, I awaken from the sleep that has managed to claim me.

When I open my eyes, fuzzy from the morning light, I see her head gently turned towards me, her eyes still closed. I hold my breath until I see the rise and fall of her chest. It's a solace I cling to.

Errantly I feel the twitch of her fingers and I realize that her hand holds mine, so gently that my fingers would slip from her grasp with even the faintest movement. I study her fingers which are slender and feminine, each nail cleanly filed.

Once I had studied those hands as I sat at her side and watched her read, the edge of her paper-cutter leading her eyes along the pathways of texts. Now they seem unfamiliar. Perhaps it is that they are without her usual rings and finery. Perhaps it is that I never really did commit those parts of her to memory. Yet how haunted I was by the shape of her lip, the curl of her lashes, the color of her eyes.

When I turn my gaze towards her face, she is looking back at me. My cheeks burn with embarrassment at having been caught and I sharply retract my hand, patting down the back of my upswept hair.

"I will fetch Signorina," I say, before rising to my feet. I am stiff from so long in one position that I am unsteady as I go to the door.

"Olivia," she says so softly I can barely hear it and yet it stops me at once, freezes me in place. I turn to look at her over the shoulder of my

puffed sleeve. She is looking back at me, skin white as snow and eyes glassy and glittering.

“Have I harmed you?”

The enormity of the question makes it hard to react appropriately. For she looks as if she might break if I’m to tell her the truth. Part of me, a germ of cruelty deep inside, wants to break free and slither alongside my tongue.

Yes. I want to say. *Yes you have harmed me with your coldness and your indifference.*

But I swallow it back down, press my lips tightly together and shake my head.

Tears blink past her thick eyelashes and I watch one roll backwards towards her hairline. She closes her eyes then and tilts her chin away from me.

I alert Signorina that Mlle Julie is awake but even before I can say any more, she’s gone from the room and into her chamber. I use the time to find the lavatory where I can clean my face and hands but by the time I am through, Signorina is waiting for me in the hall.

“Her fever appears to have broken.” She looks tearful and relieved and she lunges forward, encircling me in a firm embrace.

“It is because of you that she is well! You should sleep now Olivia, you must be exhausted. Please,” Signorina extends her hand towards the door next to Mlle Julie’s chamber.

I find my trunk already inside the room, and as soon as Signorina excuses herself, I walk the few paces to the bed and fall down upon it, so delirious that I am oblivious to the trappings of my corset and undergarments. It’s mere moments before slumber reclaims me, and in my dreams as always — her.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> Well this might end up much longer than I had imagined. We're just getting started, chickens!

When I finally awaken, I've lost all natural sense of time. Outside, the pale moon peeks through swaying tree limbs and the house is silent save for the *brat-brat-brat* of branches against a window pane, disturbed by the winter's wind. Striking a match from the silver tray on my bedside table, I light the candle and venture just beyond the door. The small flame illuminates a sphere of light about me.

I stop at her closed door and press my ear against the wood. I can hear no sound from within — only the incessant ticking of the elusive hallway clock. I don't know if it should give me comfort, this absence of sound. Perhaps she is resting peacefully in recovery. I dare not even consider the alternative.

I take an unsteady step back and then another in an effort to find my room again, when I collide with something in the dark.

As I stumble and reach out to keep myself from falling, I close my hand around a soft limb clothed in muslin and lace. Then the light from my wavering candle illuminates her face. I gasp, though I'm not certain whether it's from the shock of it, or if it's merely the vision of her, bathed in the amber caress of candlelight.

"I did not mean to startle you."

"You haven't." A lie. "I didn't expect you."

"Je venais juste de la salle de bain," she says and the french of it rolls off her tongue so exquisitely that I can hardly think it could mean a mere lavatory. The French always find romance in the mundane.

"How are you feeling?" I study her carefully as a doctor would a patient. Her arched brow is no longer beaded with sweat, her eyes — clear. She looks far better than the first night, but still not recovered. The air is strangled in her lungs and each breath sounds an effort. Her beautiful curled hair is down around her shoulders, having lost the smooth and perfectly pinned style it usually held.

“I believe I have seen the worst,” she answers weakly and it’s evident in her voice that her illness has taken a toll. Her eyes find mine and my skin is like gooseflesh, a shiver of cool air at the nape of my neck.

I allow myself to look upon her unflinchingly, meeting her stare without embarrassment. When she eventually averts her gaze, still I look at her features and commit each subtle difference to memory.

“Would you prefer if I returned to England?”

I hear myself asking the question as if I have no control over the words themselves. They feel like an echo spoken long ago, ringing through the past and only just caught now in the shell of our ears.

When she dares again to look at me, it’s as if she can see so deeply inside of me to parts I don't have access to myself.

“No, Olivia.” Her voice is low and there’s a ripple of pain underscoring it. “Please, stay.”

My eyes gently lower to her mouth, the fullness of her lips unusually pale. Gone was the garnet paint she often wore upon them. The urge to press my lips to hers is overwhelming. My tongue slides just behind my lower lip and my fingers twitch by my sides. I can see her chin canting subtly towards me and I try to find the courage to close the distance between us. If there were any moment to give into unbridled desire...

“Mlle Julie!” Signorina exclaims suddenly from the darkness, startling us both. “You mustn’t be out of bed!”

I clear my throat and offer my candle to Signorina which she takes in one hand, the other finding its way to the small of Mlle Julie’s back. She guides her away towards her bedchamber and I watch them go until they disappear from the hallway.

How weighted a mere few words can feel when they are laden with meaning.

She wants me to stay.

It’s enough to roll back the wasted years of silence. Enough to make up for that horrid letter I keep folded in my book of poems, the letter from Signorina asking me not to write.

I undress properly for bed this time, taking my bed clothes from my

trunk and brushing and pinning my curls for sleep. I am still exhausted from it all, but the world somehow feels less dark and I, far less alone. Perhaps I've just imagined a moment where I might have felt Mlle Julie's lips against mine. So fleeting it had been that I will never be sure.

I think of the last time I saw her before we both left Les Avons.

Don't make a scene.

It was as if she'd contemplated the worst way in which she could hurt me, to stop me from changing her mind. What would she have done had I gone against her request? What if I had taken her wrist and pulled her towards me. What if I'd pressed my mouth to hers, over and over still until she was bruised by it?

I've thought of that often. I was young then and did not know my own value. I could have fought against the decisions she made for us both. Of course, those decisions had been the right ones after all. It's bitter to even think of it, but I know now how she was protecting me from that which I had yet to understand. She shielded me from the impropriety of it. Kept me free from scandal.

Now, gone the flush of seventeen and having lived through pining for what I could not have, I welcome a scandal. I yearn for it. Seasons have ebbed and flowed and in encountering her again I am even more lost to those feelings. For they've now been given strength and volume.

It would have been easier to see her again and find my pulse did not quicken so. I would have accepted that I could never make the past the present and that the emotions I experienced then I would never feel again. Sadly it is not so. I am still regretfully lost to her.

Oh, I think as my head sinks into the pillow, *how wretched it is to love with all of oneself.*

Days slip along in a slow and steady path marked by the doctor's daily arrival. Today he explained that it would be his last visit as Mlle Julie was well enough now not to need his supervision.

I have not seen her much in the interim as she's kept to her room on bed rest. Still, I help Signorina prepare meals and she takes them upstairs to Mlle Julie's room on a silver tray.

Signorina and I spend most of the days talking in the parlor over tea and English cucumber sandwiches. I fixed them for her a week in passing and she's taken great fondness to them. We talk of Les Avons, of my time there and hers before me. She has kept up with the girls and tells me where they have all gone. Mlle Dubois and Victoire live in a farm house together in the south of France! I wonder if Mlle Dubois, lean as a beanpole, has grown fat from all of Victoire's gourmet cuisine.

What I find the most amusing is that Cécile did end up marrying a Duke. Mlle Julie had said she would. I did not marry an artist or poet as I had declared that same evening in the library. Even at my age then, something told me I would not marry at all. Still I wanted to impress Mlle Julie with the romanticism of it. I would not be swayed by wealth and status. How curious then that what I truly wished for most of all was the sound of her voice reading the french poets to me as we shared a bed in some flat in Paris. Imagine if I had told her the truth of it that night, surrounded by the other girls. Would I have been returned to my mother, cast out as a deviant?

Each day I dress warmly in my wool coat and I walk through the streets of Halifax. It's a sweet little place, so different in many ways from home and even more so from France; Both of which are a world away. Life feels simpler here.

One day during my walk, I venture into a millinery and look upon all of the beautiful hats, in varying styles with swathes of creamy tule and fans of delicate feathers. A velvet bonnet catches my eye with thick lace and ribbon trim and a beautiful gathering of plumage along the crown.

"That would look lovely on you."

I turn to see a woman coming around the corner of the desk. She wears a frilled dress, bustled with row upon row of pleated silk. A wide-brimmed hat decorated with matching silk flowers and large tulle bow perches atop shining red hair.

"Good afternoon," I say politely, and she smiles broadly at me, taking the bonnet from its stand.

"You must have come recently to Halifax as we've yet to meet, and I know everyone in this town." She is bright eyed and charismatic with a generous open smile. It's odd to feel so quickly at ease with another, but it's clearly one of her talents.

“Clodagh O’Flaherty,” she extends a hand gloved in crocheted lace.

I hesitate as I’m unfamiliar with such a direct gesture but soon I lift my own hand to grasp hers. She looks expectantly into my eyes and squeezes my fingers.

“Olivia Dealey,” I answer awkwardly as if I’ve just remembered my own name. She finally releases my hand and I hold it aloft stupidly until I think to lower it back to my side.

“Delighted to meet you Miss Dealey,” she says, her voice thick with Irish brogue. “Have you come from afar? From England, I suspect with such an accent.”

“Yes, Derbyshire.”

“Have you come alone?”

The question feels weighted in its delivery. Her green eyes move almost imperceptibly between my own. I am unaccustomed to the forwardness of such a new acquaintance but there is something about her that breaks past formality. I feel like I have known her a lifetime.

“Yes,” I answer shyly. Why is it that my cheeks burn?

“I have come to visit a friend of mine, she was unwell.”

“Is that so?” Her gaze never wavers. “Who is this friend if I might be so bold as to inquire.”

“Mademoiselle Julie Tousignant.”

“Julie!” She exclaims with delight, the feathers on the bonnet tremble excitedly in her hands. “How intriguing. We have met on many occasions. I see her often at Lady Bisset’s salons. I was not aware she was ill.”

“She is recovering now and is much improved.”

“I’m glad to hear it. She’s a mysterious woman, your Miss Julie.”

“Oh,” I laugh nervously. It sounds much too familiar to speak of us so intimately. She’s never before been referred to as mine. It’s a curious feeling.

I don’t know why it is that I feel the need to clarify yet still I do. “She was the headmistress at my finishing school in France. I had not seen

her for many years until recently."

"Old friends then," she says with a smile so wise, it's as if she knows the whole story already. It's unnerving.

"Yes, old friends. Well, I should really be retuning to the house —"

"Oh surely not so quickly! You must try this bonnet as I simply cannot let you leave without seeing it modeled."

My cheeks feel even hotter but I acquiesce and follow her as she sweeps over to the large curtained mirror.

She slides the pearl-tipped pin free from my hat and sets both down neatly before grandly settling the bonnet down over my hair. She bestows it gracefully with the ceremony of a crowning then moves to stand in front of me as she ties the ribbon closure beneath my chin.

Her eyes reunite with my own.

"You look as beautiful as I had imagined you would. That golden halo of hair, like an angel upon earth."

I feel a shiver low in my belly and it's only when Clodagh steps aside, do I realize I've been holding my breath. Catching sight of myself in the mirror, I can see that it's an attractive hat, but I can feel her watching me and it stokes my natural urge to flee or merely vanish.

"Thank you Miss O'Flaherty. It is a very lovely hat."

"Clodagh. I hope I may call you Olivia, my new friend." She helps me out of the bonnet and hands my own back to me.

"Of course. Thank you for your kindness."

"I hope you shall visit again Olivia."

I dip my head in a nod before leaving the shoppe. The winter air shocks my hot cheeks and I lean light-headed against the cool brick of the building. Even as I return to the house hours later I can still hear the way she poetically pronounced my name.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> I'm not doing you dirty. You'll get the love story I promised. But there will be a journey to get there...

The next afternoon, I sit with Signorina taking our tea with our sandwiches and I tell her about Clodagh. Signorina doesn't know her, nor does she find herself venturing into the millinery on many occasions.

"I like the clothes and hats I already have," she says dully and for some reason it fills me with laughter. Tears come to my eyes and for the life of me I can't stop. After awhile Signorina catches my spell of giggles and joins in until we can't even recall why we're laughing at all.

"I can see spirits are high this afternoon."

Her voice, silken and unmistakably hers makes us both turn our heads at the sound of it.

Mlle Julie stands in the doorway to the parlor, regally dressed in a beautiful velvet brocade gown. Her hair is handsomely styled in careful upswept curls, those curls I remember with such fondness. Once again she is polished, together, filling the room with her radiance.

We both stand at her arrival, though it's the legs of Signorina's chair scraping the floor that reminds me to do so.

"Mlle Julie!" Signorina goes to her and takes her hands, "It's so wonderful you can join us! Please sit, I will refresh the kettle."

Signorina leaves the room and we are alone together.

It's not awkward or uncomfortable but there's a thread of tension thrumming between us. There's so much we've not said and that we may never have the mind to.

"If I may say, Mlle Julie. You look — much improved."

My cowardice at the last minute doesn't permit me to speak my honest thoughts.

You look exquisite. You look stunning. You are the most beautiful woman that has ever existed.

Mlle Julie smiles gently. “I understand I have you to thank for that.”

“Me?”

“Signorina told me you cared for me one evening when I might not otherwise have seen the sunrise. It seems you have saved my life.” Her voice drops so quietly that I can barely hear when she adds, “once again.”

“I don’t believe I had much to do with it but I assure you, were it true, I would make it my life’s work.”

She looks at me and there is pink blooming high upon her cheeks.

She perches in one of the high back chairs leaving an empty place between us. After a moment of silence her chin raises and she speaks, “Olivia I would like to apologize for how we parted at Les Avons.”

“I said cruel things to you. I allowed myself be be careless with your feelings and with my own. I hoped it would release you from —“

“You?” I supply sharply. I’m not sure where the violence of my emotions suddenly comes from, but I can feel anger boiling up inside of me. I take a deep breath and pinch my wrist beneath the tea table.

“Yes.” I can see her swallow. “It was, improper.”

“When I was your student?” I know I have not hidden the anger or hurt from my voice when I see her brows knit in anguish.

“Why did you ask me not to write?” I demand though my voice is not firm nor forceful. There is a lump in my throat and it catches between the words. “It seemed to me you were relieved to be rid of me.”

There is silence between us. I can see that she wants to formulate a response. She who would not use a word or form a sentence were it not worthy of a poet’s pen. Silently I curse her intelligence and her reserve, as I would give anything to know the truth of her heart without airs and graces.

There’s noise in the hallway and Signorina makes an appearance in the door. I tear my gaze away from Mlle Julie and glance towards her. Clearly oblivious to anything being amiss, she claps her hands

together and beams.

“We have a visitor! Mademoiselle Clodagh O’Flaherty,” Signorina gives me an odd look but it all happens so quickly that I haven’t time to react.

The gleaming redhead sweeps into the parlor like an actress taking to a music hall stage. She carries with her a hat box tied with a ribbon and deposits it onto an empty chaise as if she owns the house. We both stand politely and she steps over to Mlle Julie, extending her hands to squeeze the french woman’s forearms.

“Julie! I am so glad to see you. I heard you were recently unwell, but looking at you now one would never know it.”

“Merci,” Mlle Julie says with a smile, though I can tell she’s surprised and unprepared for the visitor.

“I will not stay long but I came to wish you well and bring you flowers from my garden. Signorina here was kind enough to offer to arrange them for me.”

“You are very thoughtful.” Mlle Julie speaks in stilted English to the Irish woman. I’ve so rarely heard her speak in the language, as she speaks only in French to Signorina and myself. At school we were meant to be immersed in the French and were gently reprimanded when we reverted to our native languages.

“It was actually Olivia who told me you were unwell.” Clodagh tilts her chin briefly towards me. I drop my head as I can’t bring myself to look at Mlle Julie after that transgression.

Clodagh hesitates as she looks between us, but still she continues, “I have also come with an invitation from Lady Bisset. She’s throwing a ball and it’s going to be very grand as usual. She wanted me to get assurance that you’d attend, and that you would bring your delightful old friend Olivia with you.”

“Please say she can expect you. It is not for another week which should give adequate time to prepare! I should like to introduce Olivia here to some of the most interesting people in Canada.”

No one speaks out of all of us and the change in tone becomes uncomfortable. Even from how little I know of her, it’s unsurprising that Clodagh is the one to diffuse the tension when she adds, “Please tell me I might expect you there Julie.”

Mlle Julie offers a small smile, “I would like to attend, if I am well.”

She looks paler and slightly unsteady. It does not go unnoticed by Signorina who clears her throat from the parlor door.

“Perhaps it would be best if Mlle Julie could rest, Miss O’Flaherty. Especially if she is to be well for the ball.”

There isn’t an ounce of subtlety, a signature of Signorina, but thankfully Clodagh is gracious and she reaches out to squeeze Mlle Julie’s hand with a vivacious smile, “Quite right. À la prochaine Mademoiselle.”

She moves towards me then, that same smile ever present and she extends her gloved hand for my own which I give her with some awkwardness, though less so than last time. I can feel Julie watching.

She squeezes my hand in hers. “Olivia, I’m glad I knew where to find you. You left something at the shoppe.”

Gesturing to the hat box, she turns to look at me again and there’s a flash of a wink so quick that I’m not sure to have seen it at all. Still the way her finger subtly strokes up and down my thumb, it is likely I have not imagined it.

“Until we next meet.”

She releases my hand then gracefully sweeps out of the parlor, the hems of her dress hissing against the wood. Signorina helps her to the door and I chance a glance towards Mlle Julie but she is not looking at me. Her eyes are fixed instead on the hat box perched neatly on the chaise.

Gingerly, I sink back down into the chair, unable to even look at the box myself. I had not forgotten anything at the millinery and whatever was in the box would be a present. It feels shameful almost, which is not how I generally feel when presented with a gift.

The silence is unnerving so I smile and with some gaiety exclaim, “Canadian hospitality is unrivaled!”

Mlle Julie tilts her chin towards me and there’s emotion in the depths of her expressive eyes that I cannot name.

“If you will excuse me Olivia,” she says, her fingers gathering at the side of her gown to adjust the train away from her heeled shoes, “I

feel I should rest."

Then a radiant smile, even if it doesn't quite reach her eyes and she too departs leaving me alone in the parlor with the untouched box still lingering in my periphery.

Later, when I'm alone in my room, I settle the box on the bed and work through the ribbon. I lift the lid slowly and peek beneath where frothy tule fills the oval shape. Delicately parting the soft folds, my fingertips brush against smooth velvet and I am unsurprised when I reveal the very bonnet I had tried at the millinery the day before.

There is a thin sheet of parchment tucked into the brim and I lay the hat over my lap and unfold it, greeted with the scent of fresh gardenias.

Olivia,

This bonnet belongs with you. It would be a tragedy if it were to leave with any woman less fair and I declare you the fairest.

— C

My eyes dart around the guest room to ensure I'm alone. I dare to read it again and then once more and my head spins from the flattery. So much in so few words. I can't recall a time when another has spoken so candidly about me. *Not since...*

I slip the folded note into my diary, concealing it just beneath the edge of the mattress. I've always been careful about hiding my private thoughts from others, even though my confessions have never included more than a single initial marking the place of a name. I wonder how many J's have dotted the pages over the years, waning some in the last stretch of interminable silence.

A sound on the other side of the wall pulls my attention away from my private thoughts. A small thump and then another, slightly louder. Knowing it is Mlle Julie's bed chamber beside me, I press my ear against the flowered wallpaper and listen.

There is the sharp scrape of drawers sliding open, paper rustling and the knock and slam of wood. Then there's a strangled noise, a muffled sob, and finally just silence.

My heart quickens, a natural instinct when one's anxiety is ever-present just under the surface. I wonder if she's fallen or hurt herself.

My hand, clammy and shaking is on the door handle quickly and when I swing it open I can see just the profile of her as she walks quickly past my door and disappears into another room, the door shutting with a punctuating thud.

I lean against the doorway and press my hand to my heart to calm myself. Why must I worry about her so? I can almost be certain she has never worried about me in such a fashion. For years I wondered if she was well, if she was happy, if anyone occupied her heart or her bed.

Had she ever thought of me during that time? Even once?

I'm suddenly hot-tempered as I close the door to my room, and I try in desperation to push the thoughts of her from my mind entirely. I find the folded letter from Clodagh in my diary and stroke my fingernails across the dried ink. I have wasted so much of my life yearning for something I could not have, while chances of my own happiness have been lain to waste.

Putting pen to paper I write to thank Miss Clodagh for the gift and to tell her that I will be delighted to attend Lady Bisset's ball. Then I sign my name to it and seal the envelope with a drip of wax and the stamp of my family ring.

When crisp early evening begins to fall on the streets of Halifax, in my thick woolen coat and new bonnet, I slip the envelope beneath the millinery door and then return to the house, retiring early to my bed chamber.

When I close my eyes the thoughts of *her* creep back in, in spite of myself. My determination alone is what changes deep grey eyes to green, rich auburn hair to red until nothing of her remains.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Please note that the rating is changing.

The week passes quickly and soon there remains but one night before Lady Bisset's ball.

I stopped into the dressmaker's earlier in the week and with very little time, was able to be fitted for a gown suitable for the occasion. I had certainly not thought to bring such a thing with me, under the circumstances. It's surprising I was even able to bring what I had, considering the state I'd been in.

The dress is made of gold and pink silk poplin trimmed with lace and taffeta. The neckline sitting low upon the décolleté, richly decorated with golden beads and pale pink gatherings of lace that sit just under the shoulders leaving them bare. The silhouette is trim to a tightly laced corset at the waist but with a large over skirt featuring row upon row of plisse. A matching wool cape will be to worn over it and silk lined shoes with shining gold buckles, below it.

I don't believe I've had a prettier gown.

When the dress is delivered in the afternoon, I am first to the door to receive it. It comes in a large fine box and Signorina follows me into the parlor as I lay it upon the table to open it.

"How exciting it is to receive a new dress!" I exclaim as the cord and ribbons are carefully removed. Once I've pulled off the lid and other packaging, I pluck it up by the sides of the bodice and press it to my middle, twirling for Signorina. The fabric pools around my legs and I can't help but laugh at the gaiety of it all.

When I look at Signorina, she doesn't share my delight, instead she is wrought as though she has heard some very bad news.

"Oh Signorina," I drape the dress over the table and go to her, "Is it that you can't attend the ball with us? I'm certain that if I ask Miss Clo __"

"Oh no, Olivia. No, I've never cared much for the frivolity of balls."

"Then what has you so sour-faced?" I ask, reaching up to playfully tug

one of her inky black curls.

She sighs softly, her gaze downcast, “Mlle Julie won’t be attending. She sent her apologies to Lady Bisset this morning.”

It’s almost comical how a jovial mood can be so quickly snuffed out.

“Oh?” I ask, trying to affect an air of non-concern.

She nods, looking up at me solemnly. “She is not herself, Olivia.”

It’s true that she has kept to her room for most of the passing week. I had hoped that by the ball, I would have seen her, but clearly the Frenchwoman had other plans.

“Is she unwell?” I can hear frustration lacing my voice, but I haven’t a mind to hold it back.

“I don’t know. She seems in fine health but… she says nothing. She sits in her study, staring out the window into the street, or reading her books of poetry. I cannot seem to help free her of this ailment.”

“Then perhaps she must free herself.” I say, perhaps unkindly.

“Olivia!” My name is said with horror, as though she can hardly recognize me.

“Signorina,” I can feel my fingers trembling and I reach for her hands to steady my own. Whatever care I’d taken to appear a changed woman from my time at Les Avons, I cannot hold back the feelings that plague me any longer. The truth spills out of me like a breaking dam.

“I have loved Mlle Julie since the moment I first heard her read Andromache. Loved her not as a student loves one’s favorite teacher. Not as a friend loves another.”

My heart beats wildly in my chest as I’ve never proclaimed such confessions aloud, “I loved her as Hermione loved Pyrrhus. Loved with the force of the great romantics, of suffering poets; Loved so strongly that it ached deeply in my chest.”

Tears prickle behind my eyes but there is no withdrawing the words tumbling from my lips.

“For years I have been prepared to throw everything I have in the fire, if only I knew it would warm her to do so. Yet she has been removed

from me, as if she has purposefully locked away the very part of herself that has made me feel this way for so long."

"Her smile that brightened the room, shared just with me. Her playfulness, her thoughts, her love of the great storytellers. How she would hold my hand in hers, or the way she would gaze at me when she thought I would not notice," I squeeze Signorina's fingers for emphasis.

"All I have ever wanted from Mlle Julie has been to truly know her as no other has. If I had lived the rest of my life never again fortunate enough to look upon her beautiful face, I would have accepted it, had she only written to me and shared with me the part of her that matters most. For I would move Heaven and earth would she wish it so."

The tears wet my cheeks and I cannot bear the way Signorina looks at me with such sadness.

"I wish I could stop loving her, but still my heart aches from the determined way in which she keeps me away. She asks me to stay, but she does not see me. She looks at me as if I am desirable, but she makes no attempt…"

I drop Signorina's hands and walk across the floor if only to put some distance between us.

"I cannot bear her indifference. If a heart can be broken more than once, I can produce evidence of such, for right now there is hardly a piece of mine left."

If Signorina says anything after that, I cannot hear her for the ringing in my ears. I almost trip over the hems of my skirt as I run for my chamber, closing the door tight behind me and sinking to the floor, barring it with my body.

The tears come so forcefully that I cannot stop them, and my middle is strangled by the strictness of my corset as I try to catch my breath between each wracking sob.

I am not sure how long it is before I fall asleep on the cold wooden floor but I awaken when only moonlight shines through the window.

The house is utterly quiet. I use a nearby chair and struggle to my feet.

Apprehensively, I open the door to the hall.

Hanging there upon the back of it, is my new dress. I can only imagine Signorina had made sure it was carefully arranged as not to wrinkle. Gently I remove it from the hall-stand and bring it inside my room, closing the door with a quiet snick.

I take the dress to the bed and lay it down on one side, fanning out the fullness of the skirt and smoothing my hand across the bodice, before laying down next to it.

I feel as though I have aged ten years in only a few hours, exhausted from my inner despair breaking free from its trappings.

It isn't long before I drift into dreams, a ghost of the past fast asleep in my arms.

I awake late in the morning. I don't see Mlle Julie or Signorina about, but I take a small plate of pastries to my room with a cup of chocolate to begin my preparations.

A splash of violet water before drying my skin and powdering it until it is porcelain. I dab rose-tinted beeswax to my lips to give them a shine and then study my face in the dressing table looking glass.

Lovely eyes, lovely mouth, a lovely body.

Her words come back to me and I can hear them like they've just been whispered into my ear.

I disrobe in front of the mirror, stepping out of my day dress and removing my corsetry and underlinens until I stand nude before it.

Un jolie corp.

I reach up and draw my fingernails along my neck, over my clavicle and down to my breast. A shiver runs the length of my body and I watch in fascination as tiny bumps rise across my skin in response.

Un jolie corp.

Flattening my palms against both of my breasts, my eyes fall shut, my head cants to the side. There's the press of lips at my throat and hands that glide about my waist, then beneath mine where they massage the sensitive skin. When it all becomes too much, waves of want trembling through each limb, each organ, my eyes open and for a

flash of a second it's her I see, body pressed to mine from behind, draped around my figure like a dressing gown, her mouth on my neck. Then the vision is gone and I am as alone as always.

I take fresh stockings from the armoire in my room and a freshly pressed combination. After enrobing in both, I select a crinoline and frilled petticoat as well as the perfect bustle padding to go with my corset. I find I do miss the help of Maude with my corset lacing as she can always get it to just the right tightness, but I manage well enough on my own. Finally with my underthings all in place I step into my beautiful new dress and slip my arms through each shoulder wrap. I marvel at the figure it cuts, at the way it accentuates the curves of my body. My arms are bare until I draw the lace gloves up the length of them, settling them just above the curve of my elbow.

When I finish pinning my hair in ringlets tied near the nape of my neck and framing one shoulder, I look again at the finished product. I feel beautiful.

The halls of the house are curiously quiet but I go to Signorina's room and knock once on the door. She opens it, her eyes widening when she sees me, a smile lighting her face.

"Olivia, you look the picture of loveliness!" She holds out her hand as a gentleman would to twirl a woman in dance and I humor her with one spin. "You will be a sensation."

"Thank you Signorina. The carriage will be here to collect me shortly. I should wait near the door."

She reaches out and there's a curious expression in her eyes but she doesn't say anything, just squeezes my hand gently.

"I hope you have a lovely evening."

"And you, Signorina. And you."

When the carriage does roll up to collect me, I find it isn't empty. Instead one feminine, lilac gloved hand extends beyond the door in offering. Taking it with some trepidation, I step up into the carriage hold. Miss Clodagh sits inside, hand holding mine and looking as fashionable and as attractive as I could have expected.

Her green eyes glitter darkly in the moonlight and the faint street lantern's glow.

“Oh Miss Clodagh, I did not expect you to accompany me.”

“Well I wouldn’t dream of allowing a beautiful young woman to go unchaperoned to a ball!”

I laugh with her, as the carriage begins to roll away, and faintly from the corner of my eye I can see the curtains from the upstairs landing swaying ever so slightly as they settle back across the window.

“It’s a shame Mlle Julie could not attend this evening,” Clodagh says casually, reaching out to place her hand upon my knee, “I will introduce you to everyone in attendance. You shall depart with a host of influential new friends and perhaps...” her voice lowers in timber, “... something more?”

Her words sound the very essence of proposition and when her fingertips glide across my knee as she slowly retracts her hand, I am convinced of their meaning. This evening will certainly be a memorable one, and that is the only thing of which I am sure.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Your comments give me life!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lady Bisset lives in a sprawling estate on the outskirts of Halifax, surrounded by large fields and ancient trees, manicured and well kept. The path is lined with lanterns leading the way to the main house and the carriages roll down it in a grand procession, a parade of artists, poets, actors and nobility.

I watch from the window, barely able to contain my excitement at the spectacle and the romance of it all. When I finally look across the carriage to Clodagh, I find her already watching me.

“Have you ever seen anything as lovely as this?” I ask, peeking once more out the window as the stately house grows more towering the nearer we get.

“No.”

I feel her fingers slip across my own, the silk of her glove smoothing against the lace.

She turns it over in her hands and I watch as she brings it to her lips, pressing a slow kiss to the back of it.

My cheeks flush so hotly, I’m thankful for the darkness of the carriage.

She leans forward towards me, my hand between hers, her voice a whisper, “I hope my advances are not unwelcome.”

I don’t know quite how to respond.

Predictably I think of *her*.

Mlle Julie has asked that you not write anymore.

Finally, my voice.

“They are not unwelcome,” I lift my chin in defiance of each painful memory, “in fact I find them compelling.”

Clodagh's smile spreads until it is wide across her face. She lifts her hand to cup my cheek and I turn my head into it, my eyes closing just briefly to indulge in the luxurious feel of the silk, before meeting her gaze rather boldly in return.

The carriage comes to an abrupt stop and I almost end up in Clodagh's lap as a result. We laugh at the surprise of it and then use the proffered hand of the footman to descend, one at a time onto the cobbled walk before the wide front doors to the estate

Music filters from the building and I can see a whole host of people gathering inside, talking and laughing. Clodagh leads the way and I stay close to her side as she weaves through various guests and companions. It is clear she is well-liked for many stop to greet her and she seems to know everyone's name.

After leaving our coats with one of the valet's, we move to greet the hostess herself, Lady Bisset. She is a short and stout woman wearing — of all things — a gentleman's velvet suit with tail coat and a top hat over pinned back curls. I'm shocked to see a woman of her stature and age wearing such a costume, but there's also her comfort in the clothes, the way she holds herself in them, that makes it seem a perfect fit after all.

"Bee," Clodagh exclaims, drawing her hand to her own chest, "You could make a woman blush wearing such handsome finery."

Lady Bisset winks at Clodagh and extends her hand which the redhead takes immediately, before leaning in and placing a kiss to the other woman's cheek.

"Clo, you flatter me, a fact you know I sincerely appreciate."

The two laugh together before Clodagh releases her hand and turns to me, that same hand falling upon the small of my back as she edges me forward.

"Lady Bisset, I present to you Miss Olivia Dealey of Derbyshire, and friend of Miss Julie."

"Is that so?" Lady Bisset asks, brow lifting with interest. She extends her hand to me and I take it politely.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Bisset. Thank you for inviting me this evening. You have a lovely home."

Lady Bisset smiles, “My friends call me Bee and I would like to think you shall become one. Lords and Ladies and the other pish posh is why I left Le Bon Ton to begin with.”

“Very well, Bee.” I return the smile, feeling all at once comfortable and welcome in her company.

“Now, Olivia, is it true that the captivating Miss Julie is not to grace us with her presence this evening?”

“I am afraid it is.”

“That is a great disappointment. I was rather hoping for a waltz,” Lady Bisset smiles again, lifts her index finger and nudges up the front brim of her hat. “Enjoy yourself Olivia, you are in good hands with this one.”

Lady Bisset’s attention is called away to the next guest and Clodagh takes my hand and drapes it through hers then leads me towards the ball room.

“Bee is a remarkable woman,” we walk beneath large marble archways, “And she’s rather fond of Julie.”

Why had she said that?

I feel an odd discomfort at those words and glance back at the vivacious woman holding court behind us, but Clodagh spirits us through the doors into the ballroom and I lose sight of her.

The music is very grand and it fills the room, the musicians playing high above on the second balcony.

Upon the marbled floor, couples dance grandly around one another, dressed in finery of every description. I notice quickly that the couplings are often ladies with ladies and gentlemen with other gentlemen. I’ve never seen such a thing, beyond the dances during my time at Les Avons. And then it was because there were no gentlemen present to dance with, which many of the girls would have preferred to their fellow students. All the while I had stood, willing Mlle Cara to return to her room so that I could dance with Mlle Julie. Of course it was never to be, like all other fantasies that had spun around and around in my head.

I stop to look at those dancing and Clodagh leans in, whispering into my ear, “Within these walls, we are all welcome.”

It's a curious thing to say and I don't immediately understand her meaning. Of course everyone attending had been invited.

Then as we move through the throngs of people celebrating around the edges of the room, I see a woman kissing another upon her lips, brazenly without an ounce of apprehension that others might see. There is a gentleman, his arm around another's waist, wearing matching hats and waistcoats. True not everyone is grouped in such pairings, but it's certainly not a minority.

The pieces slip into place and I better understand Clodagh's words. The world of Lady Bisset's soirée seems to exist far from constraints of traditional, stifling society. There are no judgmental stares, no harshly whispered words. It feels separate from the world and yet wholly a part of it, much like being absorbed into a theatrical production where whatever happens will be left behind when the curtain closes.

There's a bar at the end of the ballroom attended by a gentleman wearing a beautiful gown. I don't realize I'm staring until he purses his lips together and kisses the air. I feel ashamed that I'm even surprised by it. Still, he has kind eyes and a friendly face and he hands us both a glass of champagne.

I've never cared much for spirits, but the mood is jovial and Clodagh sips hers so happily that I allow myself the indulgence.

We walk arm in arm about the room while Clodagh introduces me to various poets and artists, to a famous actress and even a member of Canadian parliament. It's thrilling to encounter so many different minds in one place, but really the thing I am most delighted by is the way Clodagh holds my hand and looks at me over the rim of the crystal.

When our glasses are drained, she extends a hand to me and with exhilaration I take it. She pulls me near to her and leads me to the middle of the grand ballroom. We stumble through the first few steps as we are both unused to leading, but it does eventually becomes easier. The ambience of freedom to be one's self slackens the need to be careful with one's feet.

Soon we can spin as well as the others, and we laugh with mirth as we move quickly in time. When the music reaches a crescendo and then stops, we curtsey low as others do and she squeezes my hand in hers. She is slow to release it.

Two gentlemen approach us, both with mustaches, and ask us each for

a turn about the floor. I am hesitant to dance with a complete stranger but the man seems kind enough and Clodagh is already off with her own gentleman, halfway across the room.

My dancing partner is young but I can sense he's wise by looking into his dark brown eyes. He's also soft-spoken and while straining to hear him over the crowd, I learn his name — Mr. Robert Service.

Robert and I dance around the other couples and it feels lighthearted and gay. We talk into each other's ear, with enough volume to be heard over the music.

"Is it true you are a friend of Mademoiselle Tousignant?"

"Yes," I answer in exasperation as there seems no way to be rid of *her* even here, when all I want to do, especially now, is forget.

My tone does not go unnoticed.

"Why does she not accompany you?"

"One can never know with Mademoiselle Julie." While it's true I don't know her very reasons for not attending, I can only ascertain that they have all to do with me and little to do with having been unwell.

"It appears there is some animosity there." He moves so that we sway apart from one another and then reunite.

I shake my head, "No, not that. I —"

"Wish she were the one you were dancing with this evening?" He doesn't quite wink, it's not as overt as all that, but it's as if he can see the private contents of my mind and I hate that my innermost thoughts are so easily read.

"Oh I don't mean —"

"Do you not?" His knowing smile unnerves me.

Still, there's a genuine understanding between us that I am surprised by, having only just made his acquaintance.

He looks down the bridge of his nose, "I'm known for being quite observant, Miss Dealey. I cannot help but notice a wistful air about you. Your reaction to my question leads me to believe — there is more to it."

“She does not want me.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes.”

We dance to another song, somewhat slower than the last. Nearby I see flashes of red where Clodagh dances with the other gentleman and errantly I wonder how the evening will draw to a close. I already feel myself hoping that it never shall. For I could be very happy in a place like this, dancing with friends old and new and comfortable to be whatever version of myself I most wish.

Robert's kindness and his relaxed, gentle demeanor puts me at ease. It feels as though I have known him since childhood, that I know everything about him and yet really, it is that I know very little.

As the music swells in another great climax, a melange of stringed instruments, we slow to a stop just on the final note and hold our pose as it rings out around us.

”I wish this would all go on forever.”

He looks past my shoulder, then down into my eyes.

“Darling, Olivia.” He says sweetly.

He holds to my hand, his other on my waist and he brings my fingers to his lips to place a kiss on my knuckles.

“The clock is always slow,” his voice is soft, near my ear with a suggestive tone threading through it that divulges a secret I do not yet know. “It is later than you think.”

A half-turn and he releases my hand.

When he steps back there is a parting in the crowd and at the end of it, a woman swathed in Prussian blue, a vision so striking it leaves me breathless.

Mademoiselle Julie.

Chapter End Notes

I took liberties by moving our beloved Canadian poet Robert Service to Halifax, and perhaps played around with his timeline.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> This one was a doozy. Next one shall be doozier. Thank you to everyone kindly leaving comments. It means the world to me.

My throat is dry, my heart thumping so loudly that the music is blotted out by it and there is wrenching silence in its place.

There she stands, not ten paces away. Her dress fits her figure like she was born to it. There is little doubt that it was made directly for her, in the richest, deepest shade of blue to contrast her ivory skin. A sapphire blue stone decorates the center of the square neckline.

She is so astonishingly beautiful, more than I could ever imagine even in my most private thoughts. It is like she is the work of a master sculptor, polished marble, dreamed up and created with purpose. A dedication to the Gods.

Her eyes meet mine and I am frozen. I cannot run away from her, nor can I run towards her. I can do nothing but hold her stare, feeling the force of it course through me.

I'm aware of others around us, aware that they watch her, and that perhaps some watch me. I hear the music again, underscoring the moment as though the world moves on around us and we are suspended above, separate yet connected to it.

Then she walks towards me, the lacy train of her dress whispering along the floor. Someone stops her by placing a hand upon her forearm, but she smiles at them politely and slips free from their grasp.

She stops before me, her eyes still fixed to mine, close enough now that I can see their color, stormy and grey as though all the mystery in the world floats within their depths. Her lips are reddened, a stain that makes them look as luscious as ripe fruit and I watch as they lift in a radiant smile just for me.

"Good evening, Olivia." Her voice is softer and more luxurious than any velvet bonnet could ever be.

"Good evening."

I am holding my breath, forgetting to breathe. She is so very near, and she looks at me as she used to do, over the desk in her office. I feel the mixed emotions of that time flooding back at such a pace that it overwhelms me. I wonder if she can tell.

She holds my gaze as she extends her hand to me, her rings glittering on her fingers as she turns her palm upward in offering, “Would you do me the honour?”

The words I had yearned to hear at Les Avons, presented to me now for the first time. How I want to take her hand and to pull her to me and forget everything else that has occurred.

I should not accept. I cannot accept.

Yet I do.

I lay my palm against hers, feeling her slender fingers enclose mine, her others settling at the dip in my waist.

There is no stumbling or misplaced footing with Mlle Julie. She is a fine dancer and is accustomed to leading, which she does effortlessly and gracefully. She draws me nearer to her body and I feel my eyes drift closed, the sensation so exhilarating I’m almost sick from it.

I am moved about the floor easily by her; our skirts embracing as we step and turn in time with the music. When I open my eyes I find she is looking into mine, her pale skin dotted with the faintest color at her cheeks. There is all at once no one around, only we two left in all of the world.

It is as if we have done this hundreds of times. As if she took me into her arms and led me through the years until we came to this very moment, no longer separate but one solid piece, delicate as porcelain. Our faces are so close that my glance naturally descends to her mouth, the temptation almost too hard to resist.

We stop dancing and she loosens her hold of my hand, her fingertips ghosting along my gloved arm, up over the frilled shoulder of my gown where she lays her palm to one side of my throat. Her eyelashes hang low over her expressive eyes and she looks at me with such open desire that I almost cannot believe in the realness of it.

“Old friends.” The Irish brogue cuts through the heat of the moment like a guillotine.

Mlle Julie's hand sips away from my throat and she steps back as the redhead joins us. My skin still burns from where she had touched me. I am branded by her caress, so deeply that it marks my bones.

"Miss Julie," Clodagh says with excitement, "I hadn't expected you would come. I am certain Lady Bisset is most pleased."

"Miss O'Flaherty."

Imperceptible to most, but the tightness of Mlle Julie's smile doesn't go unnoticed.

"You see, Olivia, Lady Bisset has a special fondness for Mademoiselle Julie. What is it she calls you?" Clodagh taps her chin, "'*Le Plus Exquise?*'"

"Oui," Mlle Julie answers, "The Marchioness and I are well acquainted."

"It really is quite marvelous to watch them holding court at the salons." Clodagh takes my hand and loops it with hers, as we had done earlier. Mlle Julie's eyes flick downwards to our joined arms and there's a flash of something in her eyes.

"I was just about to ask if I might have the pleasure of your next dance Olivia." The redhead beams. "You don't mind do you Miss Julie?"

"Olivia is a grown woman, she makes her own choices." Mlle Julie says, smiling between us like she hasn't a care in the world. She dips her chin and then turns and disappears into the sea of celebrants.

My eyes try to hold to her retreating figure, but the bustled train of her dress is gone from view in seconds.

Clodagh touches my waist.

I hold my hand up to stop her and watch as confusion filters across her features.

"I have had enough dancing at present. Thank you for your companionship this evening."

Clodagh steps closer and lifts her hand in an attempt to lay it where Mlle Julie's had rested moments before. I stop her before she can and squeeze her hand reassuringly.

“I must speak with Mlle Julie.”

“I see,” Clodagh says cheerlessly.

“I appreciate your kindness Clodagh. I will always count you a dear friend.”

She presses her lips together and gives a gentle nod of understanding before leaning in and placing a soft kiss to my cheek. It’s a sweet gesture and it makes me feel glad to know I have not hurt her.

I search for Mlle Julie around the ballroom, around the joined couples and those in semi circles talking. It is as if she’s vanished entirely. Had she left?

It occurs to me to check with the valet so I lift the hems of my skirt and quickly move down the hall. While rushing through the crowd, I misstep and knock against Lady Bisset’s shoulder.

“You are in quite the hurry Olivia! Are you alright?”

“Oh Bee, I apologize for my clumsyness. Have you seen Mlle Julie?”

“When she arrived, not too long ago.” Lady Bisset, glances towards the ballroom clearing,

“I suspect she is dancing with Clo by now.”

“Miss Clodagh?”

“Yes, the two may have their troubles but they always find their way back to one another. It’s rather inspiring really.”

My stomach drops.

Surely, she couldn’t mean…

“They do make a bewitching pair do they not?”

Lady Bisset’s arm is taken by a young woman, and her attention is distracted away before there are any wits about me to inquire further.

Miss Clodagh and Mlle Julie — a pair? I hadn’t even considered such a thing. What had the story been? Had they been lovers long ago? Was it something more recent? Was it current?

I feel ill, weak-kneed as if I might fall to the floor and be stepped on

by the other guests. It might actually feel better to have such a thing happen, than to live with this knowledge, newly given to me.

Had this been a plan? Had it all been an elaborate illusion to bring me humiliation? To teach me a lesson that I was not welcome in this country, not welcome in her home or in her life? Did she laugh at me?

I cannot stop the sudden onset of tears from spilling down my cheeks, clouding my eyes and making it a challenge to find my way. I take my cloak from the valet and slip it around my shoulders before running outside.

The winter air is startling and it steals my breath away. I can feel it low in my lungs, a burn that I am grateful for. I don't wait for the carriage to come collect me from the front doors, but instead go in search of the mews myself.

"Olivia!" I hear her call my name and it stops me where I stand.

I round on her, for my sadness has turned now to anger and I cannot restrain myself.

"Do you remember when you told me you did not want to cause me harm?" I must look unhinged, crazed, my cheeks glistening.

"How I wish you had only harmed me, for then I could have recovered and gone forward with my life but instead you torture me still."

Mlle Julie's eyes are wide and she stands still as iron, her hands clenched at her side. I notice that she doesn't wear a cloak, her skin bare to the freezing night as though she's followed me in haste.

"You tried everything you could to get me to stay away and I was heedless and came without being asked. After all of these years. I thought— well it no longer matters what I thought because now I know."

I go to leave and she follows, reaching out and catching my elbow so that I spin to face her.

"Olivia stop," she demands sharply, her hands coming up to rest on my bared shoulders. I can feel she is trembling. "I do not under—"

"Yes you do," I answer defiantly.

All at once I thread my fingers into the back of her hair, my nails

scraping sharply past hairpins, my fingers tightening on the silken strands.

I look into her eyes unabashedly, drinking in the intimacy of it all then force her mouth to mine.

It is the culmination of years of want and pain and infatuation, set alight by a fervid kiss. It is lustful and selfish, yet her soft lips move with their own intensity, not resisting. It is suddenly all there — her lip between mine, my chin against hers, the scandalous caress of her tongue. My fingers grasp her hair and there's a sound from her mouth, low and rapturous vibrating down the length of my spine.

Her breathe is hot against my mouth when our lips part and I pull back enough so that I may look directly into her eyes, coal black and starry with ardor.

I release my hold on her. A curl displaced by our embrace, hangs limply by the side of her face. Her eyes look hazy, drunk, her lips parting around shallow breaths whispering in and out.

"I cannot do this any more, I cannot..." I take a step backwards and another, "... I cannot continue to love you as I do because it destroys me, Julie."

I don't stop to think, or to try and speak or to do anything but leave as quickly as I might for I am still painfully enthralled and powerless under her spell.

The carriage is cold and the ride is rough as it rolls over bridge and cobble towards the house. If I cannot get passage on a ship for England at dawn I shall stay anywhere but with her. For even now, as I put as much distance as I can between us, I cannot help but ache for her.

I lift shaking fingertips to press them into my lips, my heart heavy as the world goes by unaware, outside the carriage window. The moon shines through the passing trees and buildings and for just a moment I see her reflection in the glass pane. It's only a flash and it is gone again.

I wonder how my life might have been different had I been spared Les Avons. Been spared the warmth of her presence, her elegance, her mesmerizing eyes.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> We're getting there lads. One more chapter after this one. Hope you're still with me x

The door to the house is unlocked, and I hurry directly up the stairs to my room without pause. I swing open the lid to my trunk, and remove my dresses from the wardrobe, shoving them into it with little care or order.

So many memories ebb and flow through my mind. Les Avons. The newness of it all. Watching Mlle Julie descend the grand staircase. Listening to her read that first evening. Dreaming of Andromache. Her fingers tugging my veils. Her mouth near my ear, whispering promises she wouldn't keep. The cold night at her door.

I think of how jealous I would be when she would place a cupped palm against one of the other girl's cheeks. How I would hear her praise a student on an essay and wish something I had written had caused her that enjoyment.

Life had been so complicated then, and even though I knew that the way I felt would not be tolerated, it could never have made it any less worth feeling.

Years passed. Letters went unanswered.

The way she looked at me, feverish and sad. How we danced together. How she felt in my arms and on my lips.

"Olivia?" Signorina stands in the doorway, her features wrought with concern.

I look up from my trunk, hastily half-packed. The fight is gone from me. There is nothing left but wretched sadness plainly written across my face and filling each recess of my body.

"I am leaving Signorina. I should not have come." My voice scratches, my fingers trembling, but I gather the material of my dress to still them; The dress I had only hours ago thought my most beautiful, now an irritant against my skin.

"Leaving? In the dead of night? Tell me what has happened."

Signorina comes further into the room, her face wrought with concern.

“Why did no one tell me of Miss Clodagh and Mademoiselle Julie?” The words expel from my lips like a bitter taste.

“Tell you?”

“That they were...” I search for the right term before selecting, “companions.”

The image of the two of them dancing, unbidden, creeps into the outskirts of my imagination but I try desperately to stop myself. It will do little good to think of them together. To think that there may have been a time when red hair might have caressed auburn.

“Olivia,” Signorina says gently, “Not that I believe it is anyone’s affair but their own — that moment in time was fleeting and has long since past.”

“Lady Bisset told me.”

How indignant I am.

“Lady Bisset has a flair for romantic storytelling — some of it true, some of it dreamt up and painted to be prettier than it is, I haven’t time for such nonsense myself.”

There isn’t much left to argue, even if what she says is true, for the joy has already been stolen from me and there is nothing that can be said to restore it.

“I wish things had been different, Signorina. Part of me wishes that I’d never attended Les Avons at all.”

I pick up the velvet bonnet and rub my fingers over it briefly before dropping it in the trunk.

“I came here on a fool’s errand. I thought I could remind Mlle Julie of how things had once been. But I now know that much of what I feel exists only in my own imaginings. She didn’t want me to write to her. How could she have wanted to see me? Yet still I came and insinuated myself into her life.”

It feels like a lump of coal in my stomach and I press my fingertips against my waist, drawing a deep breath in through my nose and

expelling it slowly.

“I must go, Signorina. I simply cannot bear it any longer.”

Signorina looks lost in thought, though I can tell she has listened to me speak. With a determined sigh, she steps out into the hall.

“Please come with me.”

I don’t want to waste too much time in leaving but I acquiesce just the same. We walk together to Mlle Julie’s private study and Signorina enters first, allowing me to follow behind.

I stand awkwardly near the door, not sitting, not touching anything. But I cannot help but glance around the room, noticing her everywhere from the lace drapes hanging at the window to the velvet throw pillows nearest the hearth. Then, upon her desk my eye catches a glimpse of the silver handled paper-cutter, inscribed with her name. The very one she gave to me and that which I threw into the brush in my first attempt at extracting her from my heart.

Signorina pulls open a bottom drawer on one of the wooden cabinets in the room and then extracts a wooden box. I can tell it is heavy from the way she struggles with it until she can place it on the foot stool between us. She turns a key in the lock and lifts the lid.

“I had sworn never to reveal this,“ she says looking concerned but committed to what she is about to tell me.

“Mlle Julie did write to you, Olivia.”

My eyes drift down to the box, filled with tight rows of parchment.

“She wrote every month since we arrived in Halifax but she would not send them.”

I watch as Signorina pulls out handfuls of letters, each in yellowing envelopes and marked with my name. One envelope and then another, always the same in her feminine scroll:

Olivia.

Olivia.

Olivia.

My breath is stolen from me as I look at the small rectangles. My

finger touches the corner of one and I lift it into my hand, feeling like my heart may have actually stopped beating.

I turn the envelope over and study the wax seal. I follow the J with the pad of my index finger, circling once around its borders.

She did write.

Over the course of several long and uneventful years, I spent evenings alone in my private rooms, writing letters she had asked me not to write only to carry them over to the fireplace and allow the flames to lick at the paper until all my words were consumed.

Would she have eventually sent me one of these letters, had I continued to send my own? Would my writing, despite her request, have been enough to convince her that I was not a young girl under a spell but a woman, missing her just as she missed me?

She had always teased me about Shakespeare and other English writers and poets. But Racine, Shakespeare, all of them — did they not write the same tragedies in the end?

None of those stories could be any more calamitous to me than this.

“I wish I had known,” I say weakly to the room more than to anyone else.

There’s a sound near the door and Signorina and I both jump from the surprise of it.

Even though the room is almost exclusively lit by the moon, beyond the additional small candle illuminating the box of letters, I know it’s her.

She stands in the doorway, framed by the shape of it like a portrait. She is wearing a fur trimmed evening coat, unlike earlier when my hand had brushed her icy bare skin.

I watch her carefully and see from the corner of my eye, Signorina quietly slipping past Mlle Julie leaving the two of us alone.

Mlle Julie dips her chin as she moves to stand in the room, closing the study door behind her. There’s an unnerving silence, and my blood runs cold beneath my skin. There is so much I want to say to her, especially now that I know — now that I can be certain my feelings were not unreciprocated. But I don’t have to speak as she does before

I'm able to.

"Olivia." Her eyes are downcast, and she looks as unsure as I have ever seen her. She's always seemed to know precisely what to say, but now the words are lost on her tongue.

"You wrote." I extend one of the envelopes in my hand, then turn it over to look at the wax seal on the back, undisturbed.

What day had this letter been written? How had she felt when she sat down to write it?

"Why did you not send these letters?"

Her eyes raise to meet mine and I can see that they glisten. "I couldn't."

"Why could you not?"

"There are many reasons," she says quietly.

"I deserve to know those reasons, Julie." Had I ever said her name aloud without formality? Somehow it feels right despite the newness of it.

"I made a promise years ago to your mother that I would protect you." Julie pauses, turns her chin towards a photograph on the wall. I can't make out the figure but now I wonder if it's my mother. "How could I then lead you into the very darkness she sought my protection from?"

She breathes and the sound of it is whisper soft in the silent room, "Olivia the life of — those such as myself... those such as *ourselves*, is a difficult one. I have known for much of my life that I had," she drops her gaze to her hands, "unnatural tendencies. That is the name my mentor gave it."

I watch as she takes a step closer to me, and then another until she is close enough that I can see her more clearly in the candlelight. The skin beneath her eyes shines with tears I had not seen fall and her eyes remain glassy.

"Your mother wanted you to marry well, perhaps not a Duke, but your artist, or poet."

I remember telling her of my plans, the plans I had made on the very

spot just to have her attention away from Cécile and upon me. Did she believe me then, or had she merely wanted to think that anything else in the world mattered more to me than her?

“I wrote to you once, something I never dared speak aloud. In one of those letters,” she lifts her hand and rests it beneath my own, still holding one of the envelopes.

“Cara had feelings for me once, as you had. She had been betrothed to a young British Count, who had showered her in riches and treated her very well. She and I met at a debutant’s ball and it was not long after that she turned down her Count’s proposal. We founded Les Avons together and Cara became sicker and sicker. Perhaps it was merely in her head, as some suspected, but that did not make it any less real to her. She traded her bright future with the Count for an early grave with me.”

“When I sat with Cara on that night, the night you stayed outside the room—“ a tear nudges its way over the banks of her lower eyelashes and down in a watery trail towards her chin.

I want to take her hand, but I worry that if I do it will stop her from speaking this truth she has long since kept private.

“As I stood over her bed and looked upon her, at once I saw you Olivia, in her place. It was not her eyes nor her lips, but yours and your own soft blond curls,” she lifts her fingertips to my cheek, brushing delicately over my temples and into my hairline.

“I could not bear it. I could not bring the same ruin to you. So I distanced myself. I thought if I could keep you from getting close — I couldn’t trust myself to resist you, should I look again into your eyes or hear you speak of your love for me.”

“I was your headmistress,” she says finally, her eyes finding mine, “I am a friend of your mother’s. I am a woman.”

The envelope falls to floor between us as I take her hands in my own.

“And I am Olivia.”

I trace my fingertips up the column of her neck to rest beneath her jaw. Then slowly I lean towards her, pausing only until she cants her chin forward and presses her mouth to mine.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> I hope you enjoy the conclusion. Thank you all for taking time to read and mostly to comment when doing so. It is really the most rewarding of all.

“Je t’aime,” she whispers against my cheek when our lips separate.

“Je t’aime.” A kiss upon my jaw.

“Je t’aime.” Another against my throat.

My stomach flutters from the newness of this unfettered delight married to the unceasing desire I have carried with me for years. I can barely believe that I hear it at all and hope most of all that I have not dreamt it.

The lace trim of her collar is beneath my fingertips. The soft skin of her neck beneath my lips. My hand delicately resting on her corseted waist. It is not Racine, it is not Shakespeare, it is of this world, of this time.

Her words are my own echoed back to me. Words that had expelled so forcefully from me as I had buried my face in her skirts and cried from the painful fullness of my heart. I had thought she would have forgotten my troubled admission. I’d imagined I was merely one of many who had uttered those words to her, brazen and unprovoked. I still remember the hours that followed, my cheeks persistently burning from the shame of it.

I look into her eyes, so close to mine that I can see, even in the dark, the etchings of blue blurring the grey. Her full mouth glistens and I cannot help but claim it once more in a gentle embrace.

“It is late,” she says softly, and I wonder if she can keep the time by the loud beating of my heart.

“It seems so very early,” I answer, my hands at her hips, her curvaceous lace and velvet swathed figure against my own. It is excruciatingly difficult to step back from her, to extract my hands from her waist, my fingers from the softness of her gown.

I don’t ask what is next. It no longer seems important, the planning of

futures, the ‘what if’s and ‘what may be’s. There is something profound, something irreversible that has occurred. Secrets revealed that can never be unlearned, a box of letters once written in ink that can never be erased.

I find that suddenly, none of the rest of the story matters; The lost years, the unkind words, the velvet bonnets and unsavory revelations.

“Then I should say Goodnight to you,” I repent, a small smile upon my lips.

She looks between my eyes, then leans forward and places a tender kiss to the left of my lips.

“Goodnight.”

I make my way towards the door, but I hear her behind me, calling my name.

I stop and watch as she takes the paper cutter from the desk and brings it to me, lifting my hand within her own before placing it in my palm and closing my fingers around it.

“I must confess, I gave you this once as an unspoken promise that I would one day replace it with my heart.” Julie looks again into my eyes and I can feel mine prickle with emotion. I can’t imagine there is anything more romantic than this proclamation.

“I began to wonder if that day would ever come,” she admits ruefully.

“And I promise,” I whisper in response, “I shan’t ever be careless with it again.”

I raise my hand to her cheek and she closes her eyes briefly. She has not lost an ounce of her beauty. The face I look upon now is barely changed by the world. I know my own appearance is different; My softness is gone and there are sharper features and bolder lines in its place. The only evidence that any time has passed at all upon her visage is in the silvery white at her temples drifting through the dark like foam along a shoreline. Shakespeare had called it, ‘gilding the refined gold’. Oh, what verses he could have written had he looked upon or known Mlle Julie.

My hand slips from her skin, and her irises rise from beneath the canopy of her lashes. Her gaze drifts subtly down to my mouth and it looks for a moment as though she may lean into me. I fear that should

I taste her against my lips again, I may never stop.

With some regret I offer her a small smile and then take my leave, though it is with weighted steps that I do so. I can think of nothing I want more than to take her in my arms and consume her until we are no longer separate, but one presence, one soul. I wonder errantly, if we have always been.

She is mine. I am hers.

It is the only line that appears in my diary.

I am so filled with nervousness. I can imagine it is not dissimilar to that of a bride on the day of her wedding. Possibility has unfurled before me and I can see it all laid out so clearly that I cannot decide what I shall do first.

Suddenly I welcome the coming days, and no longer dread them. There had been a time where I had preferred instead to live in my dreams where I could enjoy the things in sleep I could not have in waking. Now when I open my eyes and stare at the ceiling, I know she is here somewhere in this house and that she desires me just as I do her. It feels as though my dreams have completely enveloped me.

I drag the tip of Julie's paper cutter under my words on the page. Her name in loopy scroll upon it sends a shiver along my spine and I close it inside the book pages as I set my diary on the nightstand.

A sound.

A gentle knock and then the handle turns and I watch her come through the door in a dark dressing gown, carrying a glass candle lamp. She comes to my bedside and then sits next to me as she had so many nights before at Les Avons.

Now we are not headmistress nor student. We are Julie and Olivia and absolutely nothing beyond these walls matters more than that.

"I —," she starts quietly but her voice falters, the words dying on her lips. I allow her time to speak but nothing follows. She looks down into my eyes and I into hers.

I can feel my fingers trembling as I take her hand in mine. I watch her closely as I delicately trace her palm, and then lower it to the curve of my breast. Her eyes are dark with desire, and they drift downwards to

where her hand rests upon me. She flexes her fingers ever so slightly and her warm skin against my shift covered breast sets my body ablaze.

Emboldened by the wildness of my eyes and the catch of my breath, she grazes the tips of her fingernails across the raised peak of my breast. Despite the minuscule movement, I am wound so tightly I feel I could faint from it.

Her hand drifts upwards to rest delicately upon the flushed bare skin of my chest and she flattens her hand over my heart, holding it there in silence until it feels as though it beats quite literally in her hands.

She leans forward and places a kiss at my neck, then another lower on my throat, her mouth open, her tongue hot on my thin skin. I press my head into the pillow and squeeze my thighs together beneath the blankets just to quell the pulsing ache between them. Her lips find their way lower on my body until they latch upon my breast through my nightdress and I cry out in astonishment before I can help myself.

She lifts her head to look at me, a warning therein for I mustn't forget we are not alone in the house. Still, at her lips is a small satisfied smile and she makes a 'tsking' sound that doesn't sound in the least bit chastising.

I reach for her and draw her into my arms, moving aside in the bed so that she may settle beside me. Her hair smells cleanly of rose water and lavender and I luxuriate in inhaling the intoxicating scent of it as I bury my nose into the silken strands. I marvel at the softness and wonder what it looks like when it is loose around her shoulders.

Emboldened, I draw my hand along the curve of her waist, down the flowing fabric of her dressing gown before gathering it into my fingers and lifting it up the length of her leg.

She watches me in the darkness, the moon illuminating her face from my window and I glimpse her brows knitting together and her lips falling apart around a silent moan when my fingers dare to venture between her thighs.

I watch the way her breath expels from her lungs, the strangled sounds of her, and it guides my hand. When the ache between my own legs is almost painful, I press my palm firmly between hers in reflection of it. Her eyelashes flutter closed, her body tight beneath me and her thighs clench against my hand.

Carefully I flex my fingers, my palm lifting, then laying flush against her and her breath comes swifter still as a result until her skin has a sheen and she digs the edges of her nails into my shoulders.

Her body grows tenser and she moves her hips to meet my hand. I can do nothing but observe, transfixed at how enthralling she is beside me, in the throws of her undoing, her thighs squeezing tight to my wrist.

All at once she trembles against me, her fingers grasping my shoulders, her body as rigid as porcelain.

“Olivia!” My name whispers past her lips into the darkness, the sound of it so salacious and exquisite that I am drunk with it.

Her fingers loosen, her body boneless and breathless beside me and I place my hand to her cheek and neck as I watch her slowly return to herself.

“Will you stay?” I ask her, my cheek once again upon the pillow we now share.

She turns her eyes to meet mine and a small smile decorates her lips as she nods, “Oui. Pour toujours.”

Forever.

I cannot recall ever being this happy. I slide my arm about her waist and she does the same, our bodies coupled together so perfectly that they might have been made to rest just this way.

Sleep comes easily to us both, and it’s the early morning sun filtered through the window panes that eventually awakens me.

Julie still sleeps on, and I watch her quietly for a time. Then I extract myself from beneath her limp arm and stand before the looking glass, to be sure I am presentable. When I catch the sight of my reflection, I look changed. There is a new confidence in me, my shoulders settled back, my skin flushed and alive. I draw my fingers through my hair, smoothing it down and even the color of it somehow seems brighter to me.

When I turn back towards the bed, she is watching me, her eyelashes low across her eyes. Then she sits up at the edge of the bed and extends a hand towards me. I take it within both of my own and bring the back of it to my mouth to place a soft kiss against her skin.

She holds to my fingers pulling me in towards her until I am standing above her, her cheek at my middle.

Sighing against my nightgown, she looks up at me and her fingers trail up the backs of my thighs in a tantalizingly slow progression. She smiles and the radiance of it steals the breath from my lungs.

Her fingers drift to my wrist and she slips each pearl button free until they stop at my elbow. I watch her work with the other sleeve and I am filled with a forceful anticipation.

But she takes her time and will not be rushed, her fingernails delicately tickling across my skin until the soft lace is loose around my arms. She looks up into my eyes, as if searching for something, and then when I dip my chin in encouragement, she gathers the hems of my nightgown within her hands and drags it upwards along my body.

The lace caresses my skin, whispering over the curves of my body until I am able to help it over my head and arms. When I am freed from the garment, I become acutely aware of my sudden state of undress and I thought I would be much more bashful except when I look upon her she is studying my nude figure with eyes brimming with hunger and I feel that I must appear as she had hoped I would. It is thrilling to me.

She holds my wrists in her hands and guides me to turn away from her, looking at me so openly, all the while, until her hands at my hips bring me down upon her lap.

Her arms encircle me, her fingers caressing over my shoulders, down my arms, across my breast. The lace from her nightgown scratches against my back and I feel her lips descend upon the back of my shoulder. I lean back into her, my head resting upon her shoulder, my cheek against the softness of her hair. I feel I could rest this way forever, but her hands slide between my knees and she separates my legs, baring my overly sensitive flesh to the morning light.

Her fingertips caress along the apex of my thighs and I can feel I am trembling, the whole of me wanton and unhinged. Even as she whispers into the shell of my ear, her slender fingers sinking into my aching sex, I am amazed at how unabashed I feel.

Later it would be her lips and the softness of her tongue that would turn out to be the most extraordinary of all.

It is hard to imagine how a story as peculiar as ours could end without tragedy. There is no lost love, no tortured hearts, no missed chances. When all odds were against us, still we found our way past the binding, unharmed.

Where I would oft try to recall every detail of our time together at Les Avons, I find I revisit that period less and less. Instead I bask in the offerings of each day. Julie is no longer a fading memory, desperately recalled, but rather a presence, both tangible and real.

For there is one thing I can be most assured of; There is no remorse in living one's life for the unwavering love of Mademoiselle Julie.

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